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COMMITTEE ON CONFERENCES
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Agenda item 3 (b)*

CONTROL AND LIMITATION OF DOCUMENTATION: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RULES AND REGULATIONS ON CONTROL AND LIMITATION OF DOCUMENTATION: COMPLIANCE WITH THE SIX-WEEK RULE FOR THE ISSUANCE OF PRE-SESSION DOCUMENTATION

Note by the Secretariat

1. At its forty-seventh session, the General Assembly, by paragraphs 7-9 of its resolution 47/202 B of 22 December 1992, urged the Secretary-General to take necessary measures to ensure that pre-session documents for meetings were distributed no less than six weeks before the meetings in all official languages, unless there was a specific decision by the body concerned regarding the timing of issuance of pre-session documentation; urged the substantive departments of the Secretariat to comply with the rule which required them to submit pre-session documents to the Office of Conference and Support Services at least 10 weeks before the beginning of sessions, in order to permit processing in time in all official languages; and requested the Secretary-General, in the context of the measures mentioned, to review all of the factors involved in the timely issuance of pre-session documentation, including the quality and timeliness of submission to the Office of Conference and Support Services, and to report thereon to the General Assembly at its forty-ninth session through the Committee on Conferences.

2. At its forty-eighth session, the General Assembly, in its resolution 48/222 B of 23 December 1993, having expressed concern at the late issuance and distribution of documentation, requested the Secretary-General to submit to it at its forty-ninth session, through the Committee on Conferences, an analytical report on the factors that contribute to that situation. The outline of the proposed study had been presented to the Committee at its 1993 substantive session (A/AC.172/1993/CRP.8).

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* A/AC.172/154/Add.1 and Corr.1.

3. In a related matter, in part II, paragraph 42, of its resolution 48/228 of 23 December 1993, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit to the Assembly at its forty-ninth session a comprehensive study on the organization, management and human resources requirements for the provision of adequate conference services as a basis for the consideration of his proposals for the regular budget for the biennium 1996-1997. The results of the first phase of the comprehensive study, and actions proposed for the second phase, currently before the Committee on Conferences (A/AC.172/1994/CRP.6), have a direct impact on policies governing the control and limitation of documentation, as well as on performance improvement with regard to the timely issuance of documents.

4. The present conference room paper is therefore a provisional version of the report that will be submitted in its final form to the General Assembly at its forty-ninth session. The views of the Committee on control and limitation of documentation and those related to the comprehensive study will be taken into account in the preparation of the final report.

I. DEFINITION OF DOCUMENTATION POLICY

5. Directives for the control and limitation of documentation are prepared in response to resolutions and decisions of the General Assembly, as well as on the basis of analysis by the Secretariat of its experience in processing parliamentary documentation. The relevant series of directives (ST/AI/189 and addenda) also covers other aspects of the publications policy of the Organization.

6. Current regulations focus on page-length (24 pages for Secretariat reports and the desirable 32-page limit for reports of subsidiary bodies), the date of submission to the Office of Conference and Support Services (10 weeks prior to the session) and the simultaneous issuance in all official languages (six weeks prior to the session). In the light of the comprehensive study, various options for revising the regulations and editorial directives are now under consideration, including the further limitation of page-length for reports prepared by the Secretariat, and a guarantee of shorter through-put time, accomplished largely by a formal change in policy so that documents that are submitted late are no longer given priority processing to ensure issuance by the opening of the session. This change would have the added advantage of creating a strong incentive for author departments to submit manuscripts in compliance with the page- and time-limit.

II. DEMAND FOR DOCUMENTATION

7. Within substantive units, the stages involved in processing documentation can be divided into research, drafting, clearance and submission of manuscripts. Within the Office of Conference and Support Services, processing occurs in the following units: editing; reference; translation; text-processing; reproduction; and distribution.

8. Demand for documentation includes requests for processing in any combination of the units referred to. Such requests may require advance work

for future documents, rapid translation of letters and correspondence that will not be issued as official documents, as well as full processing of parliamentary documentation. Current statistics do not include the total demand, as no record is kept of requests which, for one reason or another, are not executed. However, the number of requests for documentation services received by the Documents Control Section, which examines, registers by computer, schedules and forwards to processing units in the Office of Conference and Support Services all the requests for documentation it receives from other departments and offices, serves as an overall indicator of the volume of work of the Secretariat, including author units, and of total demand for documentation that has been processed in part or in full. Since the adoption by the General Assembly of resolution 47/202 B, which set in motion the review covered in the present report, the volume of requests processed by the Office of Conference and Support Services has increased steadily from around 45,000 per year up to 1990 to 57,663 in 1991, 80,765 in 1992 and 84,354 in 1993.

9. This increase in the volume of work appears to have adversely affected the ability of author units to comply with the 10-week deadline, which in turn compromises the Secretariat's ability to issue documentation in compliance with the 6-week rule.

10. Over the last five years, increased demand for documentation has largely been attributed to the expanding activity of the Security Council. The number of meetings held from January to June 1994 in political and Security Council activities was 505, against 391 for the same period in 1993. It is often difficult to pinpoint the amount of documentation these meetings generate, as much of the work consists of advance texts processed and reprocessed for use only by members of the Council during informal consultations. The following statistics highlight the increased translation output from 1989 to 1993 that stemmed from political and Security Council activities:

Political and Security Council activities: translation output

(In pages)

1989	1990	1991	1992	1993
22 066	27 130	44 360	73 900	158 006

11. The higher level of activity of the Security Council has clearly generated a considerable additional volume of documentation, but not for the Security Council alone. The experience of 1993 shows that, while the Security Council requests frequent and numerous reports on the progress of peace-keeping and other missions undertaken under its authority, these reports, most of which require immediate issuance, are much less voluminous than the reports on the financing of such missions that must also be issued at frequent intervals and that, because of the extensive information they contain, create very serious bottlenecks for author units and document-processing services alike.

12. In his report on the support account for peace-keeping operations (A/48/470/Add.1), the Secretary-General noted that 116 reports on peace-keeping

operations totalling 1,380 pages were processed for the Security Council in 1993, and around 140 reports on financing were presented to the General Assembly, the Security Council and the Fifth Committee. Given that in most cases these reports consist of nearly 100 pages or more, and the fact that they must be considered by the Fifth Committee and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions within strict, predetermined deadlines, the production of these reports represents an example of urgent issuance that necessitates constant readjustments in the processing of other work in progress, and a high concentration of staff resources.

13. Demand for documentation in the economic and social sectors has also changed. As a result of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, a new functional commission of the Economic and Social Council has been established, and special conferences have been held. Several subsidiary bodies of the Council have found it necessary to hold special sessions, thus reverting to annual meetings instead of a biennial cycle of meetings, with each special session requiring a certain volume of documentation. These meetings generated around 29,000 manuscript pages of documentation in 1994, not including roughly 2,000 pages of documentation for the Council itself.

14. These additional documentation requirements, combined with late submissions by author units endeavouring to cope with increased workloads and other factors, such as lengthy documents and extremely short deadlines, frequently oblige the Office of Conference and Support Services to delay the processing of documentation submitted well in advance, so as to allow documents received later to be considered by the relevant bodies by the scheduled date. The following statistics on pre-session documentation for the forty-sixth to forty-eighth sessions of the General Assembly highlight the extent of late submissions:

Pre-session documentation for the General Assembly submitted by 31 August

(In percentages)

Forty-sixth session	Forty-seventh session	Forty-eighth session
30	28	24

15. The increase in demand and the frequent need to deal with documentation questions on a crisis-management basis have precluded any improvement in the overall situation.

III. PREVAILING SITUATION WITH REGARD TO THE TIMELY ISSUANCE OF DOCUMENTATION

16. While documentation has been issued later as a result of the above-mentioned factors, the new documentation needs have, for the most part, continued to be met. In the period from 1990 to 1994, the number of words translated per staff day in the first half of each year rose by over

40 per cent. From 1989 to 1993, the volume of contractual work increased by 26 per cent in translation and by 49 per cent in word processing.

17. It has been possible to cope with the increased workload as a result of increased productivity throughout the Office of Conference and Support Services. While increasing productivity would seem to be a valid approach to the situation, given the growing demand, it does not provide for long-term improvements in workload management. Moreover, increases in productivity should, ideally, be channelled into improved services, particularly in terms of the timely processing of documents.

18. The volume of work carried out has increased considerably more than staff resources, which in the case of the translation services have in fact diminished from 1989 to 1993. Staff resources comprise permanent staff, temporary assistance and, in word processing and reproduction, overtime as well. Translators and editors also work beyond the normal working day and on weekends whenever necessary in order to advance work.

19. While technological innovations and new work methods have not drastically changed the work environment in the Office of Conference and Support Services during the past few years, they have helped to improve quantitative performance. In translation, a higher proportion of work is carried out on a self-revision basis by senior translators and revisers, which has increased output per staff member. The drawback, however, is that gains achieved in productivity are somewhat offset by losses in quality control.

20. Innovations in the field of text processing have provided more powerful equipment to replace hardware that was becoming obsolete and would have been incompatible with the word-processing standards in force for the Secretariat as a whole. By providing desktop publishing capabilities, these innovations, which are also used extensively by editors and proofreaders in the preparation of official records and publications, have allowed for considerable economies in funds previously used for contractual typesetting and have shortened the turn-around time for the issuance of official records and publications.

21. In brief, the productivity of the document-processing services has improved, and this improvement has contributed greatly to making available to intergovernmental and expert bodies the increasing volume of documentation they request. However, improvements in productivity in the short term are finite, and therefore, in the meantime, a more timely issuance of documentation must be achieved by other means.

IV. EFFORTS UNDER WAY TO IMPROVE TIMELY ISSUANCE

A. Secretariat

22. Two interdepartmental task forces were established within the Secretariat to seek solutions to the documentation crisis. The establishment of the task forces was prompted primarily by the realization that the volume of pre-session documents for the forty-eighth session of the General Assembly was very high and that the issuance of those documents was even less timely than in previous years, as their submission for processing had been proceeding at a slower pace

than in the past. The task forces were requested, inter alia, to review current mandates for documentation and determine whether any such mandates were obsolete and should be discontinued, with a view to making recommendations to the relevant intergovernmental bodies.

23. One task force was instructed to deal with documentation on political matters, while the other had to examine documentation in the economic, social and related sectors. The members of the task forces were senior or mid-level managers with ample experience in documentation matters from four different areas in the Department of Political Affairs and from the Department of Peace-keeping Operations, the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, the Department of Administration and Management, the Department of Public Information and the Office of Legal Affairs (task force on political documentation); and from the Department of Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development, the Department for Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis and the Department of Development Support and Management Services, as well as representatives in New York of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the United Nations Office at Vienna, the Centre for Human Rights and the Regional Commissions (task force on the economic, social and related sectors). A representative of the Office of Conference and Support Services was a member of the two task forces.

24. The considerations and conclusions of the task force on documentation in the economic, social and related sectors are contained in a report of the Secretary-General (E/1994/88) that was submitted to the Economic and Social Council. The report includes suggestions for enhancing the modalities of reporting in the economic, social and related fields, which are incorporated into paragraph 30 of the present paper.

25. The task force on political documentation has considered the possibility of preparing draft suggestions to Member States on the reduction in the number of items included in the agenda of the General Assembly. It is also trying to determine whether there are mandates for documentation that have become obsolete and could be discontinued and has focused on efforts to reduce the length of the annotated preliminary list of items.

B. Intergovernmental bodies

26. At the level of intergovernmental bodies, the General Assembly has recently considered the question of documentation under item 53 of the agenda of its forty-eighth session, entitled "Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly". The outcome of its consideration is contained in resolution 48/264 of 29 July 1994.

27. By this resolution, the General Assembly encouraged Member States to exercise restraint in making proposals requesting new reports of the Secretary-General, bearing in mind the desirability of reducing the number of such reports, and emphasized that reports requested of the Secretary-General should be made available in all official languages in a timely manner in accordance with the rules of procedure of the General Assembly and the annexes thereto with a view to enabling delegations to consider the substance of such reports more thoroughly in advance of meetings. Regarding the related question

of the contents of its agenda, the Assembly, while reaffirming the right of Member States to propose, in accordance with the rules of procedure of the General Assembly, items for inclusion in the agenda, encouraged its Main Committees to review their agendas for the purpose of considering whether it was possible to merge items, to examine them in clusters or to biennialize or triennialize their consideration.

28. Also at the intergovernmental level, the Executive Board of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)/United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) adopted new working methods that have drastically reduced the volume of pre-session and in-session documents. With regard to pre-session documents, by its decision 94/4, the Executive Board decided that reports from the secretariat should normally consist of no more than three pages and include sections identifying the objective of the report, means of implementation and the decision requested of the Board. Where unavoidable, additional information should be provided in an annex or addendum to the report. As to in-session documents, the Board dispensed with summary records and, at the same time, shortened the reports on its sessions and reduced the length of its decisions by eliminating preambular paragraphs.

29. It is estimated that total documentation for all sessions of the Board in 1994 will amount to around 1,000 pages, against the average yearly volume for the period 1990-1993 of around 3,700 pages. In an effort to ensure timeliness, the Board, by decision 94/24, decided that, when reports to the Board were not submitted to the Office of Conference and Support Services for translation into all official languages seven weeks before the start of the session in which they were to be discussed (nine weeks in the case of country programmes), the relevant items would be postponed until the next session of the Board unless the Board decided to retain an item on an exceptional basis.

30. The Economic and Social Council also took steps to control and limit documentation. In paragraph 20 of document E/1994/88, the following measures were suggested for consideration by the Economic and Social Council:

> "(a) Establishing a 16-page limit for reports prepared by the Secretariat for the Economic and Social Council or one of its subsidiary bodies. The production of addenda to such reports would be strictly limited to that which is included in the legislative mandate. The 24-page limit would continue to apply to consolidated reports that cover more than a single legislative mandate (see para. (e) below);
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> "(b) Limiting the reports of the functional commissions and the subsidiary bodies of the Council to (a) a brief discussion on organizational and procedural matters and (b) recommendations, including resolutions and decisions adopted. The current practice of including an extensive summary of the discussion during the session should be discontinued;
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> "(c) Requesting the Secretariat, at the time of the adoption of a legislative mandate requesting documentation, to indicate whether the documentation could be prepared within existing staff and financial resources and, if not, to give the costs involved;

"(d) Mandating the presentation of oral rather than written reports, particularly in regard to progress reports and reports that are presented on an annual basis;

"(e) Encouraging the submission of a single 'consolidated' report on related topics under a single item or sub-item of the agenda;

"(f) Requesting the Secretariat to compile for the Council and for each of its subsidiary bodies a list of documents mandated in resolutions and decisions to be adopted at a given session in order to give members a clear picture of all documentation requested and to include in the report on the status of documentation for a given session a list of all reports already mandated for the coming year;

"(g) Making increased efforts at biennialization or triennialization of agenda items or sub-items. The Council and its subsidiary bodies should consider if, in fact, the majority of agenda items need to be examined on an annual basis."

31. During its substantive session of 1994, the Economic and Social Council had before it a draft resolution (E/1994/L.41) which reflected the suggestions listed in the preceding paragraph. On 29 July 1994, the Council decided to transmit that draft resolution and the report of the Secretary-General contained in document E/1994/88 to the General Assembly for further consideration at its forty-ninth session. Similar actions could be envisaged by the General Assembly with a view to controlling the demand for Assembly documentation.

32. The present report and the report on modalities of reporting in the economic, social and related fields referred to above (E/1994/88) bring to the attention of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council the fact that the total volume of documentation requested for the Assembly and the Council and their subsidiary bodies exceeds the ability of the Secretariat to produce such material on time, that is, in accordance with the six-week rule, within its approved resources.

33. As stated in paragraph 17 of document E/1994/88, enforcement of existing measures on control and limitation of documentation - including the six-week rule - has "proved difficult, in particular in regard to the time of submission and eventual issuance of reports in all official languages. Despite the good will and the best efforts of the Secretariat, the number and the timing of meetings of intergovernmental bodies and their documentation requirements have had the effect of compressing the time available for the preparation of documents throughout the entire process - from research and drafting by author departments, to clearance and editing, through translation and reproduction". Paragraph 18 underlines the fact that, without measures to reduce the number of meetings or of requests for documentation or of agenda items, it is unlikely that the quality and timeliness of documentation can be improved. These are also the conclusions of the present report.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Coordination and training

34. As the quality of the texts submitted can significantly impede or accelerate the processing of documentation, there is a recognized need for ongoing and advanced training of staff in author departments who are assigned to plan, draft, submit and coordinate parliamentary documentation. Such training might include editorial guidelines and directives of the Secretariat, rules and regulations for the control and limitation of documentation, information on the format and style of reports of intergovernmental bodies and of the Secretary-General to intergovernmental bodies and principles of report-writing in general. Training is particularly important in the light of the restructuring of the Secretariat, which in many cases has led to the reassignment of staff to new responsibilities, and the burden of additional work. The Office of Conference and Support Services has held consultations with the Office of Human Resources Management, and a training course for drafters of parliamentary documentation has been prepared.

B. Budgetary provision/staffing resources

35. As indicated in paragraph 3 above, a comprehensive study on conference services is being carried out in accordance with General Assembly resolution 48/228. The results of the first phase of that study are currently before the Committee on Conferences in document A/AC.172/1994/CRP.6. The relevant report that will be submitted to the Assembly at its forty-ninth session will address the issue of budgetary requirements reflecting the increased documentation processing workload and the resources needed to cope with it, including the appropriate combination of established posts, resources for contractual translation and related services, and provision for temporary assistance.

C. Forecasting/planning

36. The timely issuance of documentation can be accomplished only when quality manuscripts are submitted in a timely fashion and capacity is sufficient to cope with total demand. It is essential for author departments to understand clearly the purposes to be served by each document requested by intergovernmental bodies. Similarly, author departments must inform intergovernmental or expert bodies, at the time they adopt resolutions or decisions requesting reports, whether the documents requested can in fact be drafted and processed in time for a given meeting.

37. Any useful forecasting and advance scheduling of the documentation workload of the Office of Conference and Support Services must involve realistic deadlines for authors, an earnest effort by all authors and their managers to meet deadlines, including reviews and clearances, much earlier notice of changes in submission dates, and accuracy and timeliness in forecasts and changes in forecasts.

38. One approach to providing better advance information is for authors and their managers to project dates of key milestones before submission (completion

of field research, receipt of responses from Member States, policy clearance of the draft). The Office of Conference and Support Services would receive reports on the achievement or non-achievement of those milestones, and the impact of missing milestones on final submission dates.

39. Authors and other text-preparers "upstream" of the Office of Conference and Support Services should also be aware of requirements for the submission of electronic documentation in standard formats that are easy for editors, translators and text processors to work with.

40. The conclusion reached by the intergovernmental bodies and the Secretariat alike is that the volume of documentation produced by the United Nations has reached such ponderous proportions that it has disrupted the efficiency of the documentation chain, from author units through the last stage of distribution. Action being taken at the Secretariat level has been described in paragraphs 22-25, and at the level of intergovernmental bodies in paragraphs 26-32. In addition, the report on the comprehensive study of conference services highlights further measures that should be undertaken within the Office of Conference and Support Services and with the authors of documents and the managers of those departments within the coming months. These measures may be strengthened by the following approaches, which, it is hoped, the Committee on Conferences will support and urge the General Assembly to support.

41. In accordance with the administrative instructions governing the timetable for the planning and submission of documents for sessions of United Nations organs, as contained in paragraph 10 of document ST/AI/189/Add.23, the Office of Conference and Support Services is authorized to refuse to process any document not submitted in accordance with the instructions or by the dates specified. Such action is rarely taken, as it would result in the non-issuance, rather than the late issuance, of certain pre-session documentation. It could, however, be an incentive to comply with the 10-week rule, as well as with the rules on the length of documents. The approach would also be in line with the request made to the Office of Conference and Support Services by the Committee on Conferences in the report on its substantive session of 1993 to identify incentives to ensure compliance on the part of substantive departments with the 10-week rule. 1/ By pursuing that policy, the Office of Conference and Support Services would be in a better position to process within four weeks of their submission the reports of intergovernmental bodies that do not exceed 32 pages and the documents originating in the Secretariat that do not exceed the established page-limit. None the less, that approach would not solve the problems confronting author departments.

42. The Committee on Conferences and the General Assembly may wish to consider establishing a 16-page limit for reports prepared by the Secretariat, on the understanding that the 24-page limit now in force would continue to apply to consolidated reports that cover more than a single legislative mandate. In this connection, the submission of consolidated reports on related topics could be encouraged.

43. To secure a higher degree of compliance with the principle that reports of subsidiary organs should in all possible cases not exceed a limit of 32 pages, the Committee on Conferences and the General Assembly may wish to limit the contents of such reports to: (a) a brief discussion on organizational and

procedural matters; and (b) recommendations, including resolutions and decisions adopted. The practice of including a summary of the discussions held during the session would thus be discontinued.

44. Lastly, the Committee on Conferences and the General Assembly may wish to consider whether the six-week rule should continue to be the standard that defines "timely issuance", or whether a more realistic target should be substituted for it, taking into account the constraints of the Secretariat. For example, it might be conceivable to adopt a rule providing that, in the case of sessions of up to three-weeks' duration, pre-session documents should be issued by the opening of the session; when sessions last more than three weeks, pre-session documents could be issued two weeks in advance of the foreseeable date of consideration. In all cases, the lead time allowed for processing in all languages, after completion of drafting and final clearance, would be four weeks.

Notes

1/ See Official Records of the General Assembly, Forty-eighth Session, Supplement No. 32 (A/48/32/Rev.2), para. 92.